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Civic Center chief's future is a mystery

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The fate of Madison's most visible arts figure, Civic Center Director Ralph Sandler, is likely to be decided within the next several days.

But what's going on for now is a mystery because nobody's talking. At least officially.

Roberta Gassman, a top aide to Mayor Paul Soglin, refused to give specifics about the situation. But on Thursday, she drew a distinction between the city's commitment to the center and its commitment to Sandler, whose contract expired six weeks ago and has not been renewed.

Others who know about the situation firsthand are unwilling to talk about it, even as the center approaches its gala 10th anniversary celebration on March 9 and 10.

Soglin has said he is studying a performance evaluation of Sandler, the only director the center has had. But citing the confidentiality of personnel matters, he refused to discuss specific problems.

Many arts figures in Madison have expressed surprise at the situation, especially since the center seems to have had a series of successes under the guidance of Sandler, a consultant for the National Endowment for the Arts and the former director of the Wisconsin Union Theater.

This year, for the first time, the center came in under budget and did not have to seek additional subsidies to make up for a deficit.

Ralph Sandler

Two years ago, the center was named among 21 model cultural centers in the nation by a consultant for the NEA. And an endowment fund has been successfully launched with gala events.

However, one recent problem has been a city audit which showed that the center's caterers, Upstairs Downstairs Deli, overcharged and undercharged the public for room rentals. The audit also reported that $8,500 in income from the caterer to the center had been lost.

Sandler defended the arrangement that allowed the caterer to adjust rental rates for slower times of the week, but he admitted

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that the arrangement had not been approved by the commission that oversees the center.

Soglin is pleased about the Civic Center's fiscal condition, Gassman said, but she admitted that other concerns are being scrutinized.

So why a performance evaluation of this length?

City Council President Susan Bauman said Thursday she told Soglin that she was concerned about the city's lack of action.

"We discussed the fact that there is a need for something to be decided," Bauman said. "Basically, you can't leave people dangling, and you can't leave the city and the Civic Center uninformed."

By law, Sandler must be told whether or not his contract will be renewed within 90 days after it expires, and he must be given at least 90 more days of employment if the decision is made not to renew his contract.

One area of concern apparently is morale among the center's staff, said Bauman.

Are there any solutions being discussed?

Bauman said she could not discuss specifics.

Other sources have said that Sandler may be looking for a new job at the national level, perhaps with the NEA.

Sandler, however, refused to confirm or deny he was job hunting.

Sandler, who earns $55,254 a year, met with Soglin about two weeks ago and described that meeting as "amiable and informal." He is scheduled to meet again soon with Soglin.